

OXFORD

MAGAZINE

No. 469 Second Week Michaelmas Term 2024

Last week the Vice-Chancellor held her termly Q&A, hot on the heels of her annual Oration which, as she pointed out, had been a long one. It lasted 50 minutes (and is available as a Supplement to the *Gazette*). If there was one overriding message coming through both occasions it was the sheer scale of the agenda that the V-C has set herself. As she said, her job is “all-consuming”; she is “on call all the time”.

An on-line question asked whether this should be the model for leaders throughout the University: the V-C insisted that she also has another life. She had just run the Chicago Marathon and her involvement in sport was made clear at several points during the oration, in the context of this year’s celebrations of Roger Bannister’s 4 minute mile 70 years ago. “Sport is a great democratiser. It builds bridges, so we have used sport to build connections with the local community””Because sport is not just about science, physiology, stopwatches and progress, but also about aesthetics, play, friendship, community, laughter, mystery and memory: the attributes of art and the humanities, or what it means to be human... We cannot help but be inspired by people who strive to achieve excellence...”

Excellence was, inevitably, very much on display in the Oration. The extensive listing of prizes, honours, grants and new initiatives certainly creates an impressive picture of our continuing success as a world university. Although Oxford is more fortunate than most, UK universities are currently under unsustainable financial pressures: “now is the time for a radical reimagining of how we fund the higher education sector if we are to realise our full potential.” “[B]ecause of the extraordinary generosity of our alumni and philanthropists who want to invest in our excellence, we stand not just resilient but strong.”

KINDNESS

“[T]his year we are posting the largest total ever received for the University in a single year at £262 million – combined with the colleges, the figure currently stands at £375 million, but with more to come.”

“[W]e are passionate too about sharing success and talent with other areas of the UK – we are aiming to

support a new innovation park at Birmingham where we can also place our [spinout] companies.” “We share a vision....we are now actively working on a collective narrative for what we believe we can achieve in collaboration here in the Oxford Valley – to coin a phrase.....”

After two years the V-C’s enjoyment in the job remains intact, although “last term was tough”, she said. Perhaps she was referring here to the tensions represented by the occupation of the University Offices in May by students protesting over the University’s response to the Middle East situation or the protester encampments at the University Museum and in Radcliffe Square which had eventually to be forcibly terminated. “Freedom of speech is the lifeblood of our University and we uphold the right for everybody to openly express their views and opinions with respect and courtesy, within the limits of the law. Discrimination of any kind....has no place....at Oxford, as I have said time and time again.”

In the week following the oration and on the day before the Q&A (16th October) the BBC reported that: “The administrative offices of the University of Oxford have been damaged and daubed in red paint by a group protesting what it claims are the institution’s links to Israel. The university said three people attacked the building in Wellington Square on Monday with lump hammers, smashing glass doors and windows. A university spokesperson said it was working with police to identify those responsible, which it claimed had tried to enter the offices, for the “un-

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...and much more

justified violent attack". The Palestine Action group said "locals and students" had worked with it to damage the building. It said it attacked the university because of continued investments in Israel "despite intense student and community pressure in the last year...."

* * *

Asked what she would wish to be her legacy and by what she should be judged as V-C she answered "human capital". "When I took up office in January 2023, I set out a commitment to shift the dial in our culture about how we invest in people at Oxford." The salary enhancements resulting from the Pay and Conditions review represent "an additional £129 million commitment in people over the next 5 years".... "And if we are true to our mission of achieving excellence then we must continue to secure the best possible talent from wherever, bringing diversity to Oxford in its broadest sense." "Our new strategic plan for the collegiate University on EDI – which will be formally launched later this month – recognises just that while also emphasising the fact that good EDI is underpinned by a commitment to academic freedom and free speech." "[O]ur new Thriving at Oxford action plan" [has] "a particular focus on the prevention and management of work-related stress", which is recognised as an issue.

In the Q&A the V-C referred to the next five-year University-wide Strategic Plan which will be finalised over the next two terms. Strategic Plans are notoriously difficult to pitch, varying from total blandness on past occasions to our last one which was finely prescriptive. The V-C said that it was crucial to get this one right. (Hopefully work on the new one will start with a review of the extent to which past promises have been fulfilled and have met stated

aims). Among present aims the V-C highlighted extending the availability of graduate scholarships (available to only 1/3 of postgraduate students so far) and Oxford's traffic chaos. "My new appointment of a Local Global Officer last year is bringing dividends, as we remove Town and Gown barriers..." "Our Vision Zero campaign, focused on road safety through training, engaged over 2,000 members of our community." She reminded us that life expectancies in men vary by as much as 13 years across parts of our city.

She saw the Strategic Plan as an opportunity for integrating the many silos and inconsistencies of policy and practice that exist across the University – she mentioned varying practices in the handling of probation periods for new employees as an example. A member of the audience at the Q&A asked why the University did not publish a statement of its values. The V-C endorsed the idea but she did wonder whether this could be achieved within her term of office.

In the midst of such a flood of achievements, perhaps the single most concerning indicator of current trends in the health of the University was the following: "The Counselling Service saw more than 12% of Oxford students for individual or group-based support – anxiety remaining the largest presenting issue...and more than 2,000 staff have now received training in responding to concerns about student mental health over the last 2 years."

As for the future: "In a world that is constantly changing, and with worldwide elections, financial pressures and the many heart-wrenching conflicts, including in Ukraine and the Middle East, we lead and stand strong by working together with kindness and generosity".

T.J.H

How to initiate Congregation actions

How to trigger a debate or discussion in Congregation

It is open to any 20 or more members of Congregation to propose a resolution or topic for discussion at a meeting of Congregation; requests must be made in writing to the Registrar not later than noon on the 22nd day before the relevant meeting. Any 2 or more members of Congregation can submit an amendment to, or announce an intention to vote against, a resolution or a legislative proposal (*i.e.* a proposal to amend the statutes). Notice must be given to the Registrar (in writing) not later than noon on the 8th day before the meeting.

Questions and replies

Any 2 or more members of Congregation may ask a question in Congregation about any matter concerning the policy or the administration of the University. Requests must be submitted to the Registrar (in writing) not later than noon on the 18th day before the Congregation meeting at which it is to be asked. The question and the reply (drafted by Council) will be published in *Gazette* in the week prior to the relevant meeting. The answer is also formally read out at the meeting. Supplementary questions are allowed.

Postal votes

Attendance at meetings of Congregation tends to be low. Postal voting can potentially allow opinion to be easily accessed more widely across Congregation membership. Congregation can trigger a postal vote after a debate (but not after a discussion or a question and reply where no vote is taken). 25 or more members of Congregation have to be present ("on the floor") at the relevant debate. The request must be made by 4pm on the 6th day after the debate, signed by 50 members of Congregation, in writing to the Registrar. Council can also decide to hold a postal ballot, by the same deadline.

Flysheets

To generate a flysheet for publication with the *Gazette*, the camera-ready copy (2 sides maximum) should be submitted with at least 10 signatures on an indemnity form (obtainable from the Registrar) by 10am on the Monday in the week in which publication is desired.

Regulations governing the conduct of business in Congregation can be found at: <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/regulations/529-122.shtml>

Items placed on the agenda for Congregation are published in the *Gazette*.

The Congregation website is at: www.admin.ox.ac.uk/councilsec/governance/congregation.

Advice on Congregation procedures is available from the Council Secretariat on request (email: congregation.meeting@admin.ox.ac.uk).

Choosing a Chancellor

G.R.EVANS

By the time the next issue of the *Magazine* appears in Fifth Week, Oxford will have a new Chancellor (unless a second round is needed). In 2003, the last time Convocation elected its Chancellor, there was some press coverage, but nothing to compare with the flurry of headlines and speculation prompted by the present election, not least in the student newspapers. The *Oxford Student* interviewed Lord Patten in July,¹ alongside Baroness Royall,² David Willetts³ and Imran Khan⁴ as candidates in September. *Cherwell* took a look at six ‘front-runners’.⁵

Why is this election of such national interest, given that the Office is chiefly ceremonial and carries few if any formal powers or duties? A Chancellor may seek to be influential but is wise to tread carefully in that direction and appear rarely in the press. Oxford is only too newsworthy. Open a newspaper and there is a fair chance you will find it mentioned. The University remains top of international league-tables, but that news broke only on 9 October and has not noticeably interrupted the press coverage of the aspiring Chancellors.⁶ The new Chancellor will have difficulty in avoiding requests for interviews.

Unlike Congregation Convocation has no age limit. It includes along with members and former members of Congregation ‘all the former student members of the University who have been admitted to a degree (other than an honorary degree) of the University’.⁷ The resulting electorate for the Chancellor is not only huge but widely dispersed, and the whereabouts of many of its members may not be known to the University unless they register to vote. The press coverage may have been a useful reminder to do that before the closing date of the list for this election.

The electorate of 2003 chose Chris Patten in person and in gowns, its members identifying themselves by College and year of matriculation. Now the election is to take place digitally. That was successfully managed in the election of a new Professor of Poetry last year. However, the numbers voting for the four candidates (respectively 103; 269; 459; and 720) represent a drop in the ocean of Convocation’s tens of thousands.⁸ It remains to be seen whether the numbers voting for the Chancellor will better reflect the size of the potential electorate (250,000).

Fifty members may no longer simply nominate a candidate. To elect a Chancellor the University now needs a ‘Chancellor’s Election Committee’ to organise the election process, consisting of the High Steward as Chair, the Vice-Chancellor, three Council members (one of them ‘external’), five members of Congregation representing the Divisions and GLAM, the early career research staff representative who attends Council and the Chair of the Conference of Colleges. Its duties are to establish a timeline for the process, advertising and framing the ‘job specification’ for the ‘vacancy’.

This suggests that ‘the University is seeking candidates who can demonstrate’ three things. They must have ‘outstanding achievements in their field and the ability to com-

mand respect beyond it’, so as to ensure that they are taken seriously both among academics and in the wider world. They must not especially favour the links with business which are now treated as a selling-point by a number of universities. Instead they must show a:

‘deep appreciation for the University’s research and academic mission, its global community, and its ambition to remain a world class research and teaching university.’

Personally, the Chancellor must make an effort to ‘enhance the reputation of the University locally, nationally and abroad’,⁹ though that is not a stated constitutional responsibility of the Office. The Chancellor simply has such ‘functions and powers as are assigned to them by the statutes and regulations or by the law of the land’ (Statute IX, 4) and the Regulations merely list the ‘insignia of the office of Chancellor, that is, the statutes, the keys, the seal of office, and the staves of the bedels’.¹⁰

The intention has been to ‘avoid any preferences or affiliations’, with ‘applicants from a diverse range of backgrounds’ being ‘warmly welcomed’.¹¹ Among those on the list at the time of writing are some with clear party-political loyalties, including the Conservatives William Hague and David Willetts and Labour’s Peter Mandelson. As a Pro-Vice-Chancellor and former Head of House Elish Angiolini is very much an internal candidate. Margaret Casley-Hayford has relevant experience as Chancellor of Coventry University. The rest of the list of 38 is miscellaneous, including a former Attorney General, a surgeon, a bar-tender and a ‘private tutor’ among others.

Several aspiring candidates have stated their position and declared their intentions, though it is reported that Lord Mandelson, tipped to be ambassador to the US, is understood to be concentrating on becoming Chancellor of Oxford University.¹² William Hague told *The Times* that he saw tin-rattling as important:

‘Universities have to be on a sustainable financial footing, which is why the chancellor has to be engaged in bringing in endowments and philanthropic support so Oxford can remain at the front rank of world-leading universities.’

A Chancellor would need strong connections in the United States because ‘that is where so much of that philanthropy comes from’. Such connections ‘across business, philanthropy, politics, I do have in the United States,’ he says.¹³

On 17 October the *Gazette* published not only the full list of the candidates’ names but also a Flysheet including their 750-word candidate statements published exactly as they had submitted them. These reveal much previous experience of varied relevance, claims to be competent to ‘lead’ a complex organisation, promises to reform the University or to make protests on its behalf.

The new Chancellor is likely to be urged to take a position on currently topical or controversial issues. Freedom of speech, though protected by the *Higher Education (Freedom of Speech Act)* of 2023, allowed the Office for Students to fine or sanction higher education providers and student unions in England. Soon after its election the Labour Government declared reservations.¹⁴ Opponents raised concerns that the Act might be taken to protect hate speech.¹⁵ As Secretary of State, Bridget Phillipson halted its implementation on 26 July, days before the Act came into force. Should the Chancellor make his or her views known?

Oxford's Statute XII, 1 and 4 protects academic freedom including freedom of speech in considerable detail. It sets out the duty of compliance with free speech legislation¹⁶ and in July 2024 a *Code of Practice* was agreed after consultation.¹⁷ The University also publishes guidance on Freedom of Expression for clubs and societies.¹⁸

Oxford's Student Union nevertheless sought to exclude the Oxford Union from the University's Freshers' Fair because Kathleen Stock might be there as a speaker.¹⁹ Questions are being asked. The Committee for Academic Freedom asks where the candidates for the Chancellorship 'stand on free speech'.²⁰ 'Alumni for free speech', an organisation working in many universities, has sent a questionnaire. Academics signed a letter to the *Telegraph*,²¹ with those members of Congregation signing being members of Convocation whether or not they were *alumni*.

Cherwell asked several candidates about their views on Freedom of Speech. Khan, currently imprisoned in Pakistan on charges of corruption, asked 'who can know better than me right now how important all forms of freedom are?' He added a promise:

'An institution which denies people the ability to speak freely cannot call itself a university. Universities are founded on the concept of freedom – the freedom to think, speak, question, debate and create. As Chancellor I would fervently defend those freedoms.'

Dominic Grieve too placed the defence of freedom of speech squarely among a Chancellor's responsibilities. 'The right to freedom of expression under law and with civility is essential to a place of learning and underpins academic freedom. It is essential that it should be supported and I would do so.'

William Hague expressed a general view that 'freedom of speech, understanding differing viewpoints, hearing uncomfortable truths and being open to the power of reason are all vital parts of learning at universities'. Elish Angiolini also valued it as a social good, but with potential dangers:

'Freedom of speech is a fundamental and precious element of any modern democratic society and must be supported in Universities. Speech can however be abused to cause real harm, for example, re Nazi propaganda and threats of physical assault. It is therefore a freedom that must be exercised responsibly.'

Margaret Casely-Hayford noted the recognised warnings:

'A University environment should encourage listening, debating and learning from each other. As has been famously stated

elsewhere: 'I disapprove of what you said, but I will defend unto death your right to say it', and for me, an important codicil is that within a civilised society this isn't an absolute right.'

Peter Mandelson declared an interest in hearing the views of students:

'I believe in freedom of expression and in tolerance and respect for others' views and I particularly want to hear and listen to students' views and opinions during this election. But none of us likes to hear hateful or unkind speech and we are entitled to say so.'

Oxford's Election Committee for the Chancellor may not take any of this into account. It must simply exclude potential candidates who are students of the University or among its employees, any 'serving member of' or 'declared candidate for election to, an elected legislature' or (the University being a charity) disqualified from being a charity trustee. Then it must put forward those who remain for Convocation to choose from. The Alternative Vote system is used, with two rounds needed if there are more than ten candidates.²²

The Committee must also recommend a term of office. The ten years proposed this time seems relatively uncontroversial whereas a similar proposal for Cambridge, also voting for a new Chancellor this year, has prompted a ballot, called for by 44 signatories. The deadline for amendments was 1 October and for Flysheets 11 October. Voting on this issue in Cambridge will take place between 22 October and 1 November.

The *Report of the Council on the term of office of the Chancellor and the High Steward* which has promoted this controversy was published on 5 June.²³ It argued that limiting the term of office would encourage a larger number of potential candidates to apply and 'encourage a wider field of candidates to stand for election'. 'Rotating the role more frequently would also permit more frequent introduction of different skills and experience to the office,' it added. A heated Discussion followed.²⁴ In its Notice in response the Council made some amendments before publishing the Grace adjusting Statute A,1 which is now the subject of the ballot.²⁵ Important among those was the rule that a Chancellor could not be re-elected at the end of a ten year term.

The Council's *Notice* added the assurance that:

'there are no plans to revise the existing nomination process, which remains focused on nominations made by 50 or more members of the Senate and does not involve any formal body putting forward its own candidate.'

Cambridge will not be able to try out its own election procedure until the ballot's outcome is known. By then it will be possible to see how things will have gone in Oxford's counterpart election.

1. <https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2024/07/05/in-conversation-with-lord-patten-chancellor-of-the-university-of-oxford/>

2. <https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2024/09/03/baroness-janet-roy-all-makes-bid-for-oxford-chancellorship/>

3. <https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2024/09/08/david-willetts-announces-candidacy-for-university-chancellor/>

4. <https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2024/09/17/in-conversation-with-imran-khan/>
5. <https://cherwell.org/2024/09/01/a-first-look-at-oxfords-next-chancellor/>
6. <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2024-10-09-oxford-named-best-university-world-record-ninth-consecutive-year>
7. Statute III,2.
8. *Gazette*, 22 June, 2023.
9. <https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/organisation/university-officers/chancellor/chancellor-applications>
10. Council Regulations 2 of 2002.
11. <https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/organisation/university-officers/chancellor/chancellor-applications>
12. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/08/27/mandelson-lined-up-us-ambassador/>
13. <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/education/article/william-hague-why-i-want-to-be-oxford-chancellor-kj66swp3z>
14. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/article/2024/jul/26/labour-halts-tory-law-freedom-of-speech-universities-education>
15. <https://cherwell.org/2024/09/01/a-first-look-at-oxfords-next-chancellor/>
16. <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/freedom-of-speech>
17. <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/freedom-of-speech/code-of-practice>
18. <https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/life/clubs/clubs/registered-clubs/rules-regulations/freedom-expression>
19. <https://affs.uk/>
20. <https://afcomm.org.uk/2024/10/08/the-oxford-chancellor-election-where-do-the-candidates-stand-on-free-speech/>
21. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/05/16/free-speech-oxford-university-trans-row-kathleen-stock/>
22. Council Regulations 8 of 2002.
23. *Reporter*, 5 June, <https://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/2023-24/weekly/6744/section5.shtml#heading2-14>
24. *Reporter*, 3 July, <https://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/2023-24/weekly/6748/section8.shtml#heading2-22>.
25. *Reporter*, 17 July, <https://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/2023-24/weekly/6749/section1.shtml#heading2-2>
26. https://gazette.web.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/gazette/documents/media/flysheet_17_october_2024.pdf

The following announcement appeared on 16th October

Candidates running for University of Oxford's next Chancellor

Oxford University can today confirm that 38 candidates have successfully submitted applications for the role of Chancellor.

Following Lord Patten's retirement at the end of Trinity Term 2024, after 21 years as Chancellor of University of Oxford, members of Convocation, consisting of staff and graduates of the University, will now vote online to elect his successor. The full list of candidates is below, and their statements of interest can be found here.

Applications were considered by the Chancellor's Election Committee solely on the four exclusion criteria set out in the University's regulations. All applicants have been notified whether their submissions have been successful.

In the first round of voting, in the week commencing 28 October, voters will have the opportunity to rank as many candidates as they choose. The top five candidates, who will be announced in the week commencing 4 November, will proceed to the second round of voting, which will take place in the week commencing 18 November. The University of Oxford's new Chancellor will be announced in the week of 25 November.

The Chancellor is the titular head of Oxford University and presides over several key ceremonies. The Chancellor also chairs the Committee to Elect the Vice-Chancellor. In addition to these formal duties, the Chancellor undertakes advocacy, advisory and fund-raising work, acting as an ambassador for the University at a range of national and international events. The post has been occupied continuously at Oxford since 1224, exactly 800 years.

The incoming Chancellor will be in post for a fixed term of no more than 10 years in accordance with amendments to University statutes enacted earlier this year.

Candidate List:

Aftab, Sidra	Casely-Hayford, Margaret	Kay, Simon	Royall, Jan
Ahmad, Hasanat	Catlin, Graham	Mandelson, Peter	Shah, Talha
Ammora, Ayham	Connor, Mei Rose	Miake-Lye, Ryn	Shapoo, Abrar ul Hassan
Angiolini, Elish	Dandy, Emma	Moxham, Angie	Stratton, Harry
Baig, Anwar	Farooqi, Azeem	Muhammad Hafiz Shaikh,	Tajik, Tanya
Bhandari, Ankur Shiv	Firth, Matthew	Shaikh Aftab Ahmad Javaid	Tarvadi, Pratik
Bhangal, Nirpal Singh Paul	Grieve, Dominic	Parr-Reid, Maxim	Vladovici Poplauschi, Francisc
Bilal, Kashif	Hague, William	Pasha, Alam	Wang, Xingang
Bruce, Alastair	Heiming, Lyn Michelle	Pethiyagoda, Kadira	Willetts, David
Callaghan, George	Ivatts, Benjamin	Rauf, Kashmaila	

Reminders; extract from a Letter in Nature 303: 568, 1983

It is therefore interesting to note that by Act of Parliament¹ in 1854 the University of Oxford was required to elect the members of the Hebdomadal Council (the equivalent of Cambridge's Council of the Senate) by just such a limited-vote system, the limits being prescribed as “for One Vacancy, One Vote (that is, one name); for Two or Three Vacancies, Two Votes, for Four Vacancies, Three Votes; for Five or Six Vacancies, Four Votes; Provided always, that no Elector shall give more than One Vote for any One Candidate.”

However, in 1971 the Hebdomadal Council, calling this system “unnecessarily complicated”, proposed one vote for each vacancy in future. The university concurred without a single dissentient voice. It seems indeed that what most people require of a voting system is that they can understand it.

Under the STV system in which voters can select any, or all, of the n candidates and lace them in order of preference, the total number of ways of completing a ballot paper is given by x_n where

$$x_n - n(x_{n-1} + 1), x_1 = 1$$

For $n = 10$ this is 9,864,100, and gives an indication of how the STV system provides the voter with too many options. The solution of this recurrence relation involves the partial sum of the common series for e ; indeed, $x_n = \text{integral part of } (e \cdot n! - 1)$ is, remarkably enough, the exact solution for all values of n , even $n = 1$.

A. W. F. EDWARDS

Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, UK

Much Ado About Nothing

JESÚS ANTONIO SILLER FARFÁN

I agree with the writers of the many institutional e-mails we have been receiving lately: the start of the academic year gives us a chance to reflect on new perspectives and challenges in our professional lives. However, as I consider the tangible impact of the much-anticipated Pay & Conditions Report, I feel a sense of disappointment. My take-home pay has increased by just 80 GBP per month. I am also the recipient of a litany of promises for a better, brighter future for Early Career Researchers (ECRs).

Let me be clear: I never expected this exercise to deliver immediate fixes to the well-known issues of pay, inequality, and precarity experienced by ECRs (see this briefing from Oxford UCU¹). Still, I would argue that much of the steering committee's work has merely resulted in a report² outlining systemic problems that were well-known before or around the time of the Vice-Chancellor's inaugural address³. The same challenges – and promises – can be found echoed in places such as the Concordat action plan to support ECRs⁴; the 2018-2023 Strategic Plan⁵; and the 2018, 2021, and 2023 Staff Experience Surveys (SEs) and the resulting action plans⁶.

When looking at the work done by the steering committee on the contentious issue of pay, it is unfortunate to find the recognition that: “further work is required to access data on actual pay across key International Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)” (p25 in ²). Whatever little international data was processed by the steering committee was apparently presented to Council (p54 in ²). However, it is conspicuously absent from the report: why is that? The pay of research staff was benchmarked nationally, including comparisons with other HEIs and the wider industry. But since most UK universities set salaries using a single, national bargaining process⁷, what is the point of benchmarking Oxford against other HEIs? It is possible that this unnecessary comparison resulted in the steering committee recommending the 80 GBP per month supplement only for grades 1 to 5 (p102 in ²). I assume this provision was later expanded by Council at one of their

meetings during the first half of 2024. Unfortunately, substantive discussions about the report are missing from the minutes available to staff⁸.

The growing habit of placing an ever-increasing number of items under Council's reserved agenda strikes me as untenable. This problem extends across central, divisional, and departmental levels. The 2023 SES revealed that only 43% of the staff believe that management and decision-making processes in their department are clear and transparent. Frankly, I would not be surprised if requesting agendas and minutes through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 2000 yielded more complete records than the materials we currently have access to via SSO. After all, save for a few absolute exemptions, withholding information under the FOIA 2000 requires authorities to conduct a public interest test. The final response of the public authority can then be challenged through the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) or, if necessary, the First-tier Tribunal (FtT).

In my Panglossian world, Oxford – in fact, all UK universities – would recognise that genuine transparency goes a long way in fostering goodwill. They would release comprehensive financial data that would allow us to understand why Council approved only a fraction of the Pay & Conditions report's recommendations. Of course, reality continues to be grim: pursuing clarity on how universities negotiate national salaries required me to take matters all the way to the FtT¹⁰⁻¹¹. Similarly, informal or statutory (*i.e.*, under the FOIA 2000) requests to better understand why postdoctoral researchers are denied Congregation membership¹² were labelled as vexatious. It took the involvement of the ICO to make Oxford understand that such asks are not, in fact, vexatious¹³. One would think that, after an adverse decision notice and a reprimand from the ICO, the University would strive to do better and answer the FOI in good faith. You would be wrong. Oxford has now replied, indicating they still won't release any information in spite of the ICO's judgment. Their new

rationale is that disclosure of these e-mails would impact junior staff, so s40(2) can be invoked to protect them. Any FOIA practitioner can see how remarkable this response is: I am asking for communications between the Vice-Chancellor, the Registrar, the Assistant Registrar, and the Deputy Head of the Medical Sciences Division.

Much to my chagrin, it seems the ICO or the FtT will need to get involved, once again, to show our University how to comply with their obligations. An erroneous or unlawful application of these information access regimes is surely antithetical to the cherished principle of value-for-money? I hope Wellington Square takes note of the ICO guidance, especially the sections about the FOIA being motive and applicant blind.

Perhaps I should stop complaining and instead enjoy a succulent avocado toast every third day – all courtesy of the Oxford University Weighting!

1. https://oxforducu.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/2023_pay_and_conditions_report_-_draft_3-31-oct-final.pdf

2. <https://unioxfordnexus.sharepoint.com/sites/ADMN-UASMosaicDocumentHub/HR%20Support/Forms/AllItems.aspx?id=%2Fsites%2FADMN%2DUASMosaicDocumentHub%2FHHR%20Support%2FPay%20%26%20Conditions%20Report%20May%202024%2Epdf&parent=%2Fsites%2FADMN%2DUASMosaicDocumentHub%2FHHR%20Support>

3. <https://staff.admin.ox.ac.uk/files/vice-chancellor-professor-irene-traceys-inaugural-address>

4. <https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/University%20of%20Oxford%20Concordat%20Action%20Plan%202022.pdf>

5. <https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/University%20of%20Oxford%20Concordat%20Action%20Plan%202022.pdf>

6. <https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/staff-survey-faqs>

7. <https://www.ucea.ac.uk/our-work/collective-pay-negotiations-landing/New-JNCHES-Overview/>

8. <https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/council/meetings>

9. https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/edu/documents/media/2023_results_-_a_brief_narrative_report_0.pdf

10. <https://caselaw.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukftt/grc/2024/801>

11. I have yet to receive the information requested, as the University might appeal to the Upper Tribunal (Administrative Chamber).

12. *Oxford Magazine*, 8th week, Trinity Term 2024.

13. <https://ico.org.uk/media/action-weve-taken/decision-notices/2024/4031009/ic-322278-w8w3.pdf>

Survey about potential extension of lending by the Bodleian Libraries

The Curators of the University Libraries and the Committee on Library Provision and Strategy have been reviewing, and canvassing opinion on, the lending status of material held in University Libraries (see; Oxford Magazine, No 461, 2nd week, HT 2024). The following extracts are taken from the recent opinion survey – ed

The information in this report was presented at the ‘Town Hall’ events held in weeks 5 & 6 of Trinity Term, and the full report was presented to Curators of the University Libraries at their Trinity Term 2024 meeting.

Survey methodology

The two surveys (one for University of Oxford (UoO) current members; one for external Bodleian Library Card holders) ran from 13 March – 5 May 2024. The UoO survey was advertised via Divisional, Departmental/Faculty communications channels, CLiPS, College Librarians, and members of the Bodleian Student Panel. Both surveys were also advertised using bookmarks in books requested from the Collect Storage Facility (CSF) during the survey period.

The two surveys were the same, but had different phrasing of the questions to make them relevant for the particular respondents. The questions asked were:

- Status and department/faculty

- Feelings about the idea to allow books stored at the Bodleian Offsite Store that are currently only for use in the Reading Rooms to be borrowed (taken away from the library) by members of the University with borrowing rights. 7-item Likert scale.

- Reasons for the response.

- Whether three ameliorations (loan period of 1 week; applying publication date cutoff; lending only items with a digital version on SOLO) impact feelings about the idea.

Respondents were routed to different follow-up questions depending on their answer to the Likert-scale question, so that the appropriate questions about their reasons and response to ameliorations could be asked.

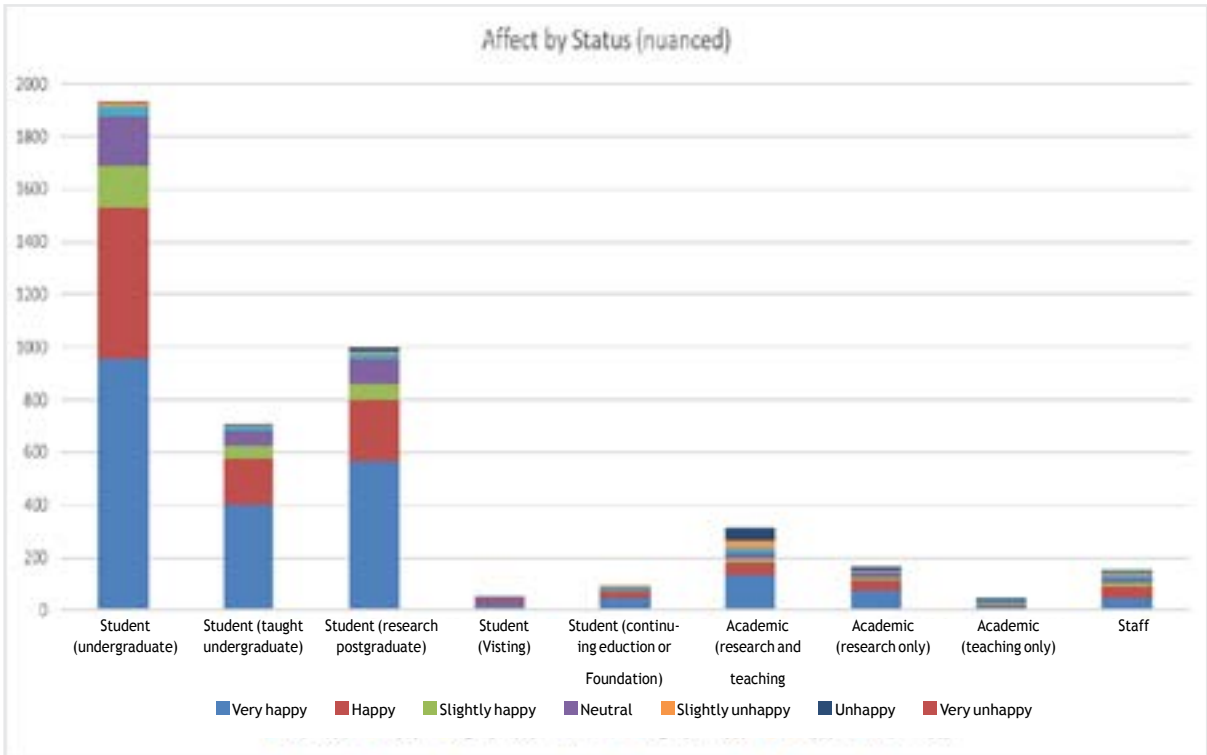
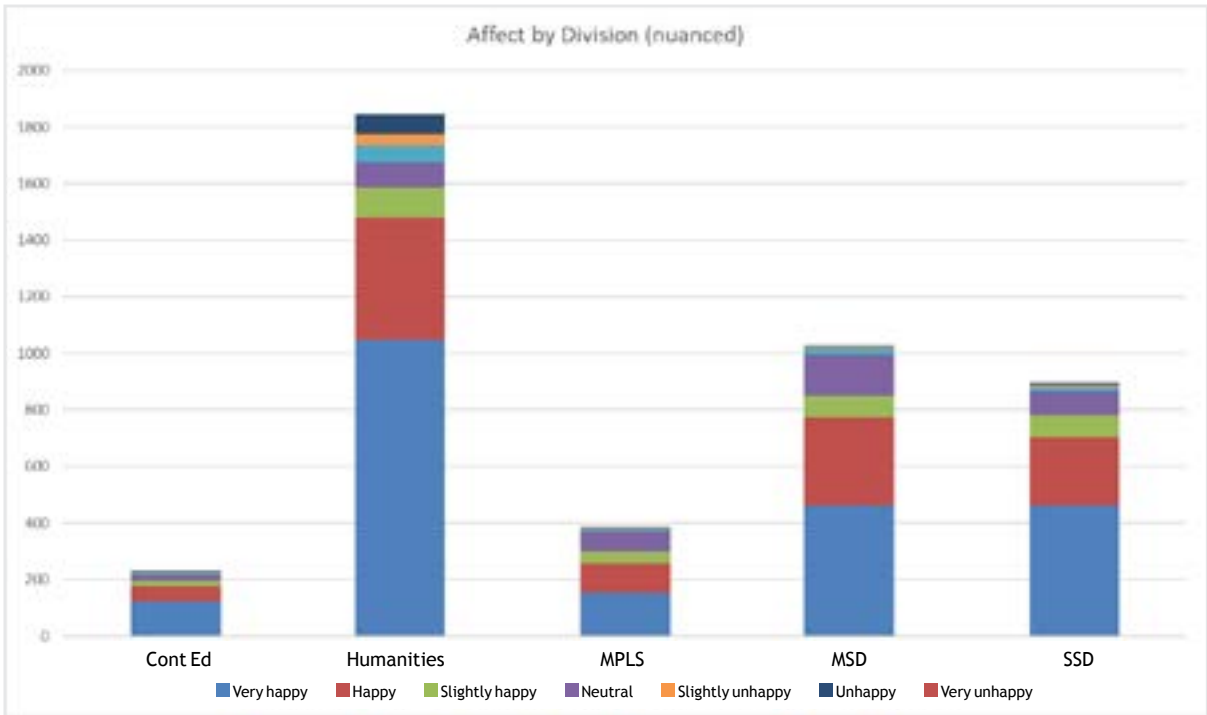
The random prize draw £100 voucher was won by an undergraduate at New College. *Responses*

There were 4,454 responses from members of the Collegiate University and 73 responses from Bodleian Library card holders. 41% of respondents from the Collegiate University were from Humanities Division; 20% from Social Sciences Division; 9% from MPLS; and 23% from Medical Sciences Division.

Eighty-five percent of respondents from the Collegiate University were students and 12% were academics. The sample of undergraduates, taught postgraduates, and research postgraduates is statistically significant, as is the sample of academics.

Results – University of Oxford

Eighty-four percent of respondents from the academic divisions were positive about the idea; 10% neutral and 6% negative. However, there was great variation by division, by status, and by interaction of both division and status, as shown in the below graphs.



	Number of respondents	Very unhappy	Unhappy	Slightly unhappy	Neutral	Slightly happy	Happy	Very Happy
Humanities students	1,524	1%	1%	2%	4%	6%	26%	60%
Humanities academics	296	18%	9%	7%	6%	5%	14%	41%
MPLS students	333	0%	1%	2%	19%	11%	27%	40%
MPLS academics	39	3%	3%	8%	15%	10%	23%	38%
MSD students	921	0%	1%	1%	20%	8%	31%	39%
MSD academics	84	0%	2%	4%	8%	8%	27%	51%
SSD students	792	0%	1%	2%	9%	9%	27%	52%
SSD academics	85	4%	2%	2%	11%	8%	22%	51%
Cont. Ed. students	189	0%	1%	3%	9%	8%	22%	57%
Cont. Ed. Academics	16	13%	6%	0%	6%	19%	6%	50%

The Humanities academics showed a very different pattern of responses to the other academics (there were too few Continuing Education academic respondents to draw pattern inference from), as the proportion of respondents who were negative, and particularly “Very Unhappy” was much larger. The proportion of neutral responses was also greater for MPLS students, MSD students and MPLS academics than the other groups.

Positive responses

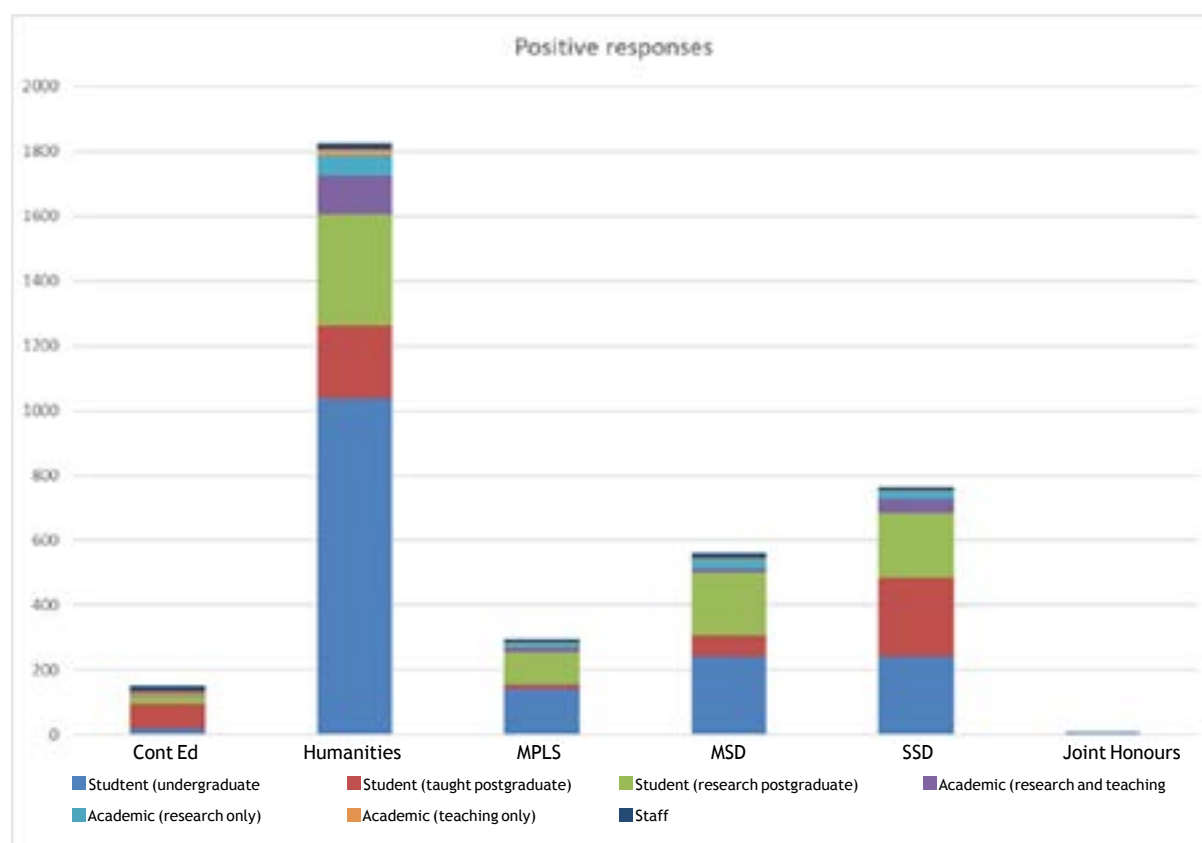
Eighty-four percent of respondents from the academic divisions were positive about the idea, though there was

a large difference based on status: 87% student respondents compared to 68% academic respondents.

The Humanities and Social Sciences Divisions were the most positive about the idea, with 87% of their respondents expressing they were ‘Slightly Happy’, ‘Happy’, or ‘Very Happy’ with the idea. This was the case for 85% of Continuing Education respondents; 78% of MSD respondents; and 77% MPLS respondents.

Positive responses were received from all statuses across the Divisions:

The most frequent reasons for respondents from the academic divisions to have positive feelings about the idea were ‘I would just find it more convenient’ (2,743



responses – 74% of positive academic divisional respondents); ‘I prefer to be in a different environment to read’ (2,034 responses – 55% of positive respondents); and ‘Timetabled aspects of my course / teaching / research do not leave me with enough time to do the reading within library opening hours.’ (1,943 respondents – 52%).

Thirty percent (1,131) of positive respondents indicated that they would like to be able to borrow books that are stored at the CSF due to factors relating to equality of access: their socio-economic status, disability, or caring responsibilities.

Applying a constraint to the items that could be borrowed would result in less positive feelings: 34% of positive respondents felt that limiting the loan period would make them less happy; 52% felt limiting lending to items that have a digital version on SOLO would make them less happy; and 46% felt limiting the items available for borrowing by publication date would make them less happy.

The following comments illustrate the types of comments received from positive respondents:

“Ever since taking up my post – a long time ago now – I’ve found the non-lending policy frustrating. It’s an obstacle in the way of research in so many ways.” (*Asian & Middle Eastern Studies academic*).

“I only have odd fragments of time to read during term, so it’s not efficient to go to a library to read” (*Mathematics academic*).

“I think this is a really good idea. Lots of the books I have requested from offsite storage are recent publications on African-American literature and it doesn’t make sense to have to leave my college library where I do most of my work, to walk across town and sit in a different library every time I want to consult the text when I’m trying to work on an essay (there is no book-safety benefit to doing so – it’s not like the books are old and fragile). Often I have to go back and forth if I realise there’s something I need to clarify that I didn’t pick up the first time round which is time consuming and feels unnecessary, so being able to borrow books would really help.” (*English Language & Literature taught postgraduate*).

“I have a chronic disease and I was advised by the University to study in my own room with ergonomic furniture. Because the scanning service has a limitation on chapter/page range, I find it difficult to access the reference only books in the main library, especially books which has only one copy in the main library. I sometimes would contact the college library to purchase rare publications so that I can borrow books back to my room, but it is more difficult for the college library to buy expensive rare publications for students.” (*English Language & Literature research postgraduate*).

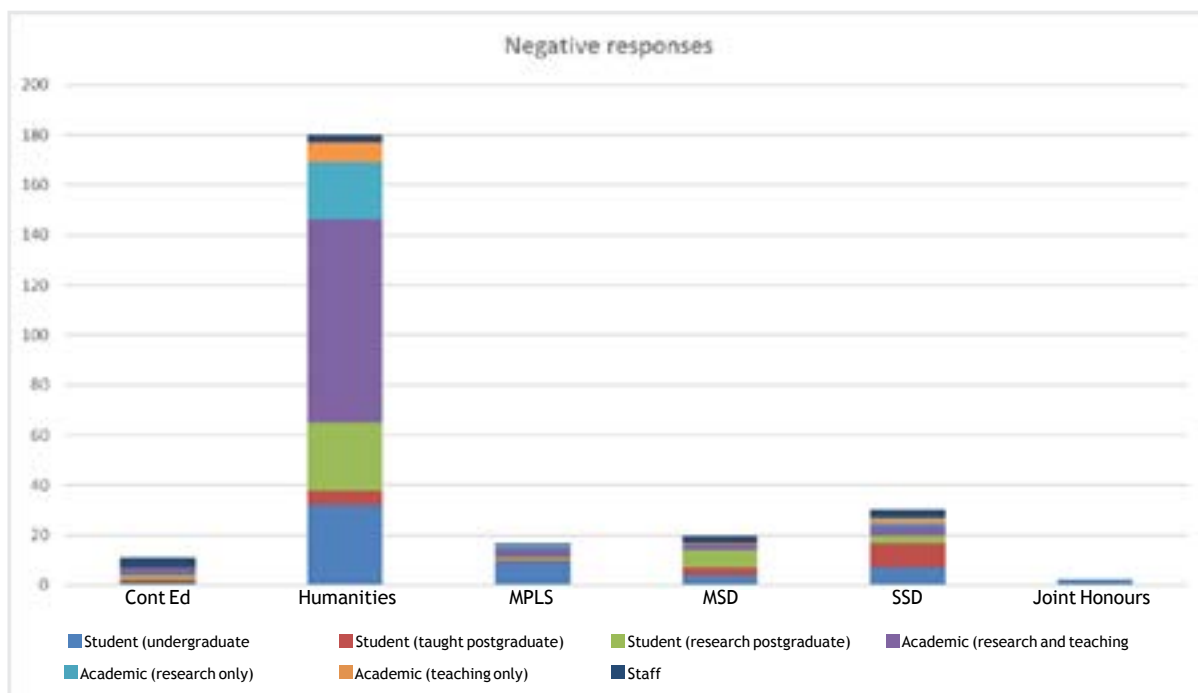
“It would be particularly useful to be able to take home particularly sizeable books that require extended and careful reading over several days. As a reader that now lives outside of Oxford, and for whom travel to Oxford over several days becomes prohibitively expensive, I have on occasion resulted in purchasing required books instead, or travelling to another, closer library, such as the BL.” (*History research postgraduate*).

“This would be a very welcome change. I can’t count the times of wanting to read or consult a certain book, seeing that it is only available offsite, and deciding ultimately against it. As a rule, I’ve come to discount offsite book as “not really available”. The time constraints and the need to be sitting in a certain library when reading the book is just too limiting to actually engage with the book. Specifically, if accessing the book is part of the larger research, where the book needs to be next to me when I’m thinking about the topic at hand. The use of the book is just different when it is in a library or offsite. This is about workflows, this is about ease of access, and specifically about time constraints.” (*Global & Areas Studies academic*).

Neutral responses

Six percent of respondents from the academic divisions were neutral about the idea: 10% student respondents and 8% academic respondents.

The MSD was the most neutral about the idea (19% of respondents), closely followed by MPLS (18%). This dropped to 10% from Social Sciences and 9% from Continuing Education respondents. Only 5% of Humanities respondents were neutral.



Comments indicate that the neutral respondents fell into six categories:

It does not affect me.

It does not affect me but I have mild positive feelings.

It does not affect me but I have mild negative feelings.

I have mild positive feelings.

I have mild negative feelings.

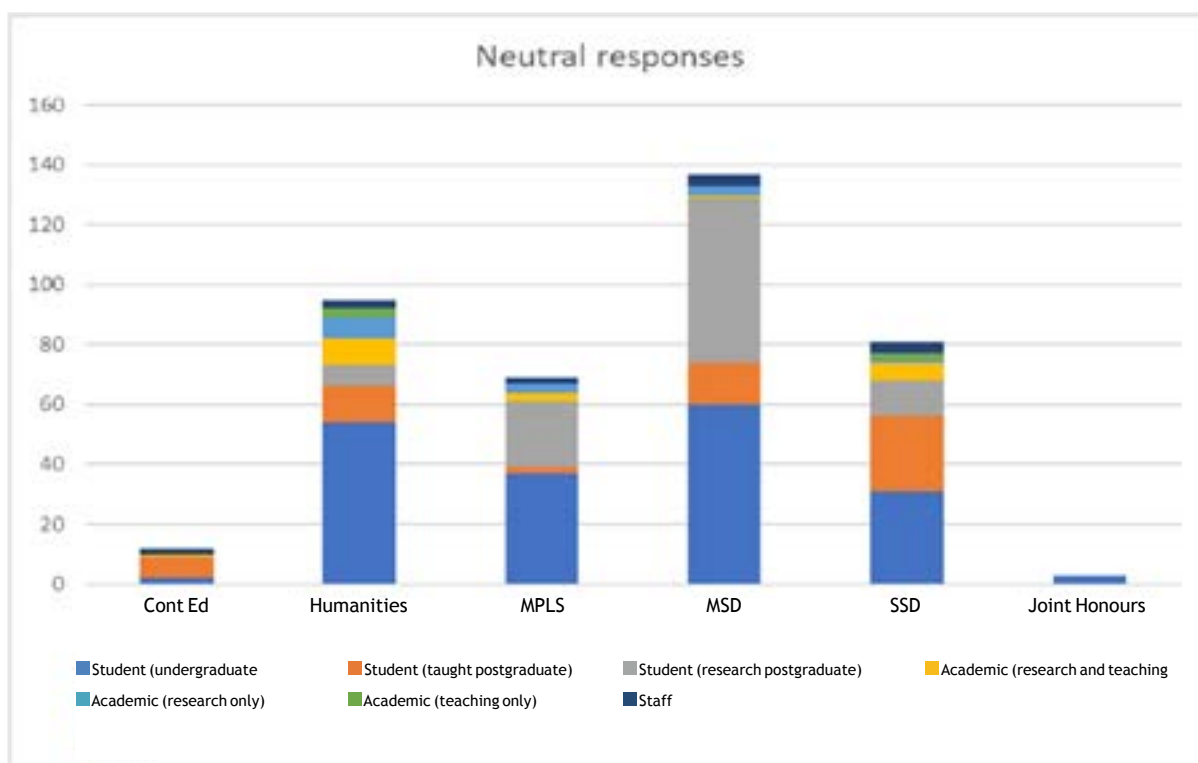
I have mixed feelings and can see some benefits and some concerns.

Negative responses

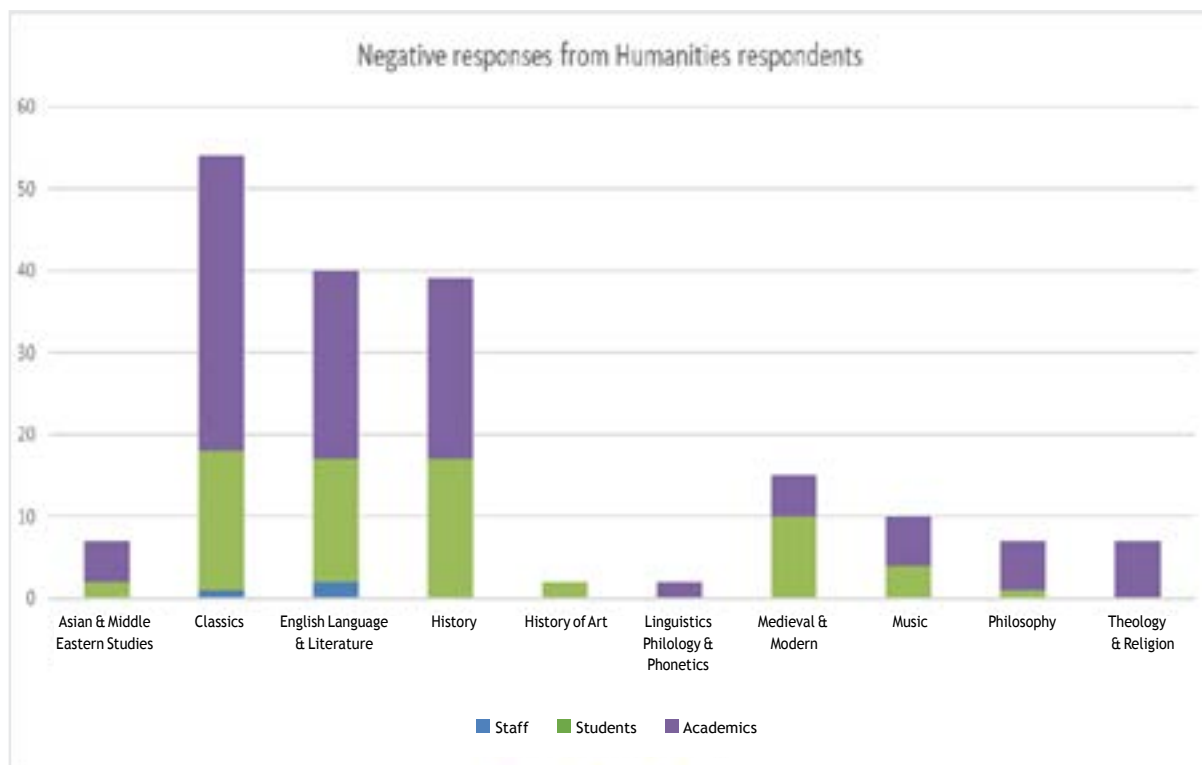
Six percent of respondents from the academic divisions were negative about the idea, though there was a large difference based on status: 3% student respondents compared to 25% academic respondents.

The Humanities Division was the most negative, with 8% of their respondents expressing they were 'Slightly Unhappy', 'Unhappy', or 'Very Unhappy' with the idea. This was the case for 6% of Continuing Education respondents; and 3% of MSD, MPLS, and Social Sciences respondents.

Negative responses were received from all statuses across the Divisions.



The highest numbers of negative responses within Humanities were from Classics, English Language & Literature, and History respondents.



The most frequent reasons for respondents from the academic divisions to have negative feelings about the idea were ‘Risk of loss of books’ (189 responses – 71% of negative respondents); ‘I will not be able to rely on books being available when I need to use them’ (188 responses – 70% of negative respondents); and ‘Risk of damage to books’ (112 respondents – 42% of negative respondents).

Only limiting lending to items that have a digital version in SOLO would produce a reduction in negative feelings (37% negative respondents).

The following comments illustrate the types of comments received from negative respondents:

“It is fundamental to the ecology of the Bodleian holdings as a research collection that they not be made available for loaning. Researchers and students (at every stage) can presently rely on bks being readily available when needed; the loaning of bks would inevitably impact this. Notions of increased accessibility of collections through loaning are specious; temporary loaning of materials makes them less universally accessible at any given time and those who wish to work in other places most of the time can reasonably be expected to come into the libraries to use non-loanable materials. Students (esp. in the humanities and social sciences) should be learning to use the libraries as coherent research collections rather than sequestering themselves in their studies, homes, cafes or anywhere else to work; it is an integral part of one's training as a humanities researcher to spend time in a library and working elsewhere is more often than not a poor substitute for being in a library. They may wish – or be under the impression that they wish – to be able to read a book elsewhere, but that does not mean that it is their best interests as a developing scholar and researcher to do so. The potential for loss of, or damage to, materials is considerable and, in the present climate when electronic legal deposit

has been grossly compromised by the attack experienced by the British Library, the idea that existing hard copies in collections should be made loanable, when electronic versions – even of younger materials – cannot be relied upon to be available, is frankly moronic. The extraordinary efforts of resourcing achieved by the Bodleian staff during the depths of the pandemic and the continued availability of ‘scan and deliver’ make loaning books unnecessary and, indeed, to do so would hamper the ability of the libraries to continue to offer this incredibly useful service.” (*Classics academic*).

“I often find myself waiting week for books which are only in faculty libraries to be returned when they are overdue. I also am myself guilty of repeatedly renewing books/ not returning on time. What is brilliant about the Bod is that I can always guarantee I can get that book and I know people often travel significant distances to do so. Most of the time frankly so only need a book for a day maybe two and the current policy allows everyone access to the books. I think most undergrads just dislike the inconvenience of having to work in the library. I think maybe the policy of lending should be limited to only people with significant disability needs/particularly compelling reasons for why they need to borrow.” (*English Language & Literature Research postgraduate*).

“My concern is mainly for books which can only or predominantly be found in the Bodleian's offsite storage. If these are on a reading list set for multiple students in a weekly tutorial, it may happen that one of them borrows

the required book leaving everyone else without access.” (*English Language & Literature undergraduate*).

“This is a very stupid idea and it must not be allowed to happen. Whoever came up with this idea should be ashamed of themselves. The Bodleian is a legal deposit library. It cannot function as one if it lets books be lent out. Undergraduates and graduate students need to spend time reading books in a library. It's hard enough to get them to do so even at present with the SOLO options they have.” (*Politics & International Relations academic*).

Results – Externals

An equal proportion of Bodleian Library card holders were positive (39%) as were negative (38%), according to the response to the Likert scale question. Although it must be noted that the numbers are small, and so any wider conclusions cannot be drawn, the results are consistent across the different statuses, except for University of Oxford Alumni, who are more negative. There are also some variations depending on subject area of research.

However, analysis of the free-text comments shows that 20 out of the 28 positive respondents thought that they would be able to borrow these items, despite the introduction making it clear that the idea would not extend borrowing rights to readers who did not currently benefit from them. The level of positive response therefore

cannot be relied upon to be an accurate reflection of the feelings of external readers.

Eight “positive” respondents made it clear in their comments that they did think the idea as described was a good thing. In addition, the neutral respondents either felt it would not impact them, or they could see that whilst it may possibly inconvenience them they could see if it would benefit others.

The reasons provided by the negative external respondents mirrored those of the University of Oxford respondents:

57% felt ‘I will not be able to rely on books being available when I need to use them’;

18% were concerned about the risk of loss of books;

14% were happy with the current situation;

11% were worried about damage to books; and

7% felt ‘This is not the proper function of the Bodleian Libraries’.

Applying a constraint would predominantly not change the feelings of negative external respondents, except limiting to items with a digital version on SOLO, which would make 39% less unhappy.

An die ferne Geliebte

for Felis

When evening comes, and shadows spread,
Remember then the times we shared:
And in your thoughts imagine well
In tenderness, the *Sanctum's* bell:
A silver note, a slight caress
A whispered thought, a wantonness
That promised life, and gave, and took
All things, compressed, within our book.

I love you now, by day and night,
At eventide, in morning light:
No hour goes by without your face
Before my eyes, in some dark place
With troubles shared, distress consoled,
In blessed thoughts dispelling cold
That tightly grips, in wild dismay
The agonies throughout each day.

May every blessing Life bestows
Make yours fulfilled, for my soul knows
None other that could bring me peace
So wonderful, so calm, to cease
All stress: may gods protect you safe
Keep you radiant, lovely waif,
My joy, my lady, heart's desire,
For no-one else could tend this fire.

Ave atque Vale

In Memory of a Lost Garden and All that was Within It

You stood atop the broken stair,
aghast, beside a shattered urn,
with sunshine caught within your hair,
a question forming in your eyes,
upon a point of no return,
a bitter, final, wild surmise
that shimmered in the thinning air.

And so you turned, with final sigh,
through screening wall of yellow flowers,
disturbing petals passing by,
on beeswinged shards of yesteryear,
forgetful of the many hours
we shared, so far, and yet so near,
but never knew the reason why.

JAMES STEVENS CURL

Professor James Stevens Curl has two books in print with Oxford University Press: *Making Dystopia: The Strange Rise and Survival of Architectural Barbarism* (2018, 2019), and *The Oxford Dictionary of Architecture (with Susan Wilson)* (2015, 2016). Other books in print include *English Victorian Churches: Architecture, Faith, & Revival* (2022) and *The Egyptian Revival: Ancient Egypt as the Inspiration for Design Motifs in the West* (2005).

REVIEWS

Life's own self-delight



Alan Hollinghurst, *Our Evenings*. Picador, 2024. £22

Our Evenings is the autobiography of David Win, who has a Burmese father and a white English mother. He is born in 1947, so lives through the events of the second half of the twentieth century and our century up to Brexit. He goes to a private school, and then to Oxford where he reads history, but his career is acting, often in challenging productions which should have come with trigger-warnings for nudity. His sensitivity to racial abuse, both heavy and light, runs through the narrative, and his homosexuality further emphasizes his outsidership. He has a number of affairs. His mother Avril has a lesbian relationship with Esme, which is very sensitively and perceptively portrayed.

What is really striking about this autobiography is how beautifully it is written. Time and time again one is struck by the brilliance and appositeness of the phrasing, which often has poetic verve, but without being precious or pretentious. Stylistically it is just about the most impressive modern novel I have read. David is saturated in poetry, and this has an impact on his writing, where Shakespeare, Hopkins and Yeats affect his approach to language.

Our Evenings is a moving and prolonged paean to England and English culture. There is a savagely comic scene when David performs the speaking part in Vaughan Williams's *An Oxford Elegy* (1947-49), words taken from Matthew Arnold's *The Scholar Gipsy* and *Thyrsis*, at Aldeburgh, and his school contemporary Giles Hadlow, by now a prominent Conservative politician and Minister for the Arts, leaves the concert early, taking off in a helicopter during the performance. He did have to sit through the racket of *Storm Warning*, but since he was tone-deaf it 'made no odds.' This is the savagely comic account of the scene:

'The hush deepened on the stage and it was just as I uttered the key words 'the eye travels down to' that the noise beyond rose abruptly in volume and pitch, a noise, now, like a braking train, the long penetrating screech from the rails, and I understood, perhaps everyone did, I threw 'Oxford's towers' like a javelin to the back of the hall, as the scream rose up into the air with a throbbing roar that shook the roof of the building, hammered and faded and came back even louder as it passed unheard, and the conductor set down his baton and bowed in defeat to his players. A mild hubbub broke out in the hall, and it was pure improv that made me say, 'Ladies and gentlemen, the lark ascending!' (p. 429)'

I suppose it won't insult too many people's intelligence to say that *The Lark Ascending* (1921), based on a George Meredith poem, is a piece by Vaughan Williams. Later, on the car radio, David and Richard listen to Radio 3's *Record Review* (a programme, alas, now banished from Saturday mornings) where Vaughan Williams's *Variations on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* is discussed in 'Building a Library'. It represents 'a great drench of Englishness, in different versions, wistful, defiant, driven or dawdling.' (p. 457) I recall listening to this plangent piece of music the day Vaughan Williams died (26 August 1958), on the car radio, going towards East Anglia.

There are many literary allusions. One of the key Hopkins references is when David and Timbo chant 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves' from memory (p. 203). At Mark's memorial service in Cadogan Hall, Chelsea, he reads Yeats's 'Ancestral Houses' from 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' – 'grand, grim and rather discomforting':

'Surely among a rich man's flowering lawns, Amid the rustle of his planted hills, Life overflows without ambitious pains; And rains down life until the basin spills, And mounts more dizzy high the more it rains As though to choose whatever shape it wills And never stoop to a mechanical Or servile shape, at others' beck and call.

Mere dreams, mere dreams! Yet Homer had not sung Had he not found it certain beyond dreams That out of life's own self-delight had sprung The abounding glittering jet; though now it seems As if some marvellous empty sea-shell flung Out of the obscure dark of the rich streams, And not a fountain, were the symbol which Shadows the inherited glory of the rich. Some violent bitter man, some powerful man Called architect and artist in, that they, Bitter and violent men, might rear in stone The sweetness that all longed for night and day, The gentleness none there had ever known; But when the master's buried mice can play, And maybe the great-grandson of that house, For all its bronze and marble, is but a mouse.

O what if gardens where the peacock strays With delicate feet upon old terraces, Or else all Juno from an urn displays Before the indifferent garden deities; O what if levelled lawns and gravelled ways Where slippered Contemplation finds his ease And Childhood a delight for every sense, But take our greatness with our violence?

What if the glory of escutcheoned doors, And buildings that a haughtier age designed, The pacing to and fro on polished floors Amid great chambers and long galleries, lined With famous portraits of our ancestors; What if those things the greatest of mankind Consider most to magnify, or to bless, But take our greatness with our bitterness?

This is part of Mark Hadlow's and David's 'inner anthology' and one reflects that

that is how you write stylishly – with the lines of great poets running through your head, not on the screen of a smart phone. Not necessarily to reproduce the lines, but to keep in mind the alert attention to language exhibited by the best poets. Not necessarily to produce that dubious genre 'prose poetry'. What is it Auden says in 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats'?

*'Time that is intolerant
Of the brave and innocent...
Worships language and forges
Everyone by whom it lives.'*

In addition to the poetic impact there is no shortage of wit in the novel, which is related to the high sensitivity to language. One bit made me laugh out loud; relatively rare when one reads. It's the description of his dad's photograph:

'The frame has a prop that folds out from behind, but the ribbon that kept it from doing the splits has perished, and after five seconds at eighty degrees Dad is flat on his back, sending other things flying.' (p. 443)

Proust is supposed to be funny, but I have only laughed out loud three or four times ploughing through his 3,000 pages. There is something Proustian about *Our Evenings*, in its highly sensitive response to environments, and the relentless passage of time. The scene with the almost gaga Mike Kidstow at the end reminds one of the Guermentes party at the end of *Le Temps Retrouvé*, although not as grotesque or prolonged. In David's mother's garden there is a sundial with a mysterious inscription. His husband Richard, towards the end of the novel, thinks it relates to Cicero's essay *De Senectute* (On Old Age): "I suppose, sort of... 'slowly, without sensing it, we grow old'." (p. 457) It gives the novel a melancholy turn.

We are remote from lego-language in this novel. A conventional writer would say that people like Giles Hadlow are 'entitled'. David writes that they possess 'a deep-seated assumption of their right to be fancied and followed.' (p. 452) An account of Giles's presence at the opening of an exhibition sums him up: 'the indurated reflex of defiance in the face of our disdain' (p. 422). There are so many telling and arresting phrases, so many vivid descriptions. We know that Whistler painted fireworks, but has anyone done a verbal description of them as good as this:

'Nothing happened for a bit, till high above two gold chrysanthemums of light bloomed dazzlingly and seemed for the space of an in-drawn breath to die, then flared and scattered in a dozen frazzled comets traced on darkness, leaving a spilling column of pink smoke as a deep boom, with a certain grandeur of delay, reached us and re-echoed from the house be-

yond. All this in three seconds, perhaps, but a gap in time opened at the wonder of the thing. (p. 380)...'

Time and time again descriptions strike home, such as this record of conversations two hundred yards away: 'a kind of music, the beautiful integrated drone of English competence, and habit.' (p. 370)

David is very fond of music, not only the classics but the contemporary music which forms the sound-track for his life. Pride of place, the gold standard, the *pièce de résistance*, goes to Jack Bruce in *Cream*: 'the voice climbed up the night... I found out today, We're going wrong.' (p. 220). Eric Clapton's guitar 'wound in alarmingly.' You can hear it on YouTube or get Alexa to play it for you. Tom Jones's 'It's not unusual' is there, Dionne Warwick's 'Walk On By', Dusty Springfield, the Beach Boys, Blondie and quite a few others. Hollinghurst makes one mistake: Van Halen's 'Dance the Night Away' (p. 219) is 1979, but we are still in 1967. I take it that this is Hollinghurst's mistake rather than David Win's.

Real events are present, but not as intrusively and routine as in Ian McEwan's *Lessons* (2022) which covers a similar time-period. One important event is the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, discussed in a group (p. 179). Both novels recall old-fashioned telephone booths – which younger readers will find inconceivably arcane: 'that trapped column of humid and unhappy air' he describes one of them as (p. 381). When my father was a teacher a pupil did a cartwheel and coins fell out of this pocket: 'Please sir, he has pressed Button B'.

Oxford readers will find a good deal that is evocative in the novel, especially the vivid punting expedition, with 'the term sliding past as swift and soundless as the muddy Cherwell' (p. 233). The Vale of the White Horse is dominant, and specific local details appear, such as Elliston and Cavell (later Debenhams) and the Estate Agent Knight Frank. He summarises Finals well, where the candidate produces 'a spooky simulacrum' (p. 234) of an essay written for a tutor. The back of the Examination Schools has buildings on the three-sides of a quadrangle which the candidates come out into (although in my day we exited onto the High Street). The side open to Merton Street is 'the air wall through which, with the last paper done, we would pass out into the rest of our lives.'

We encounter a rich catalogue of cars of the time, including an E-type Jaguar, an Austin Cambridge, a Rover 3000, a Rover 90, a Porsche, a Lancia Flaminia, an Alfa Romeo, a Daimler, a Singer Vogue, a Morris Minor, a Peugeot, a Suzuki, a Mercedes, a Lagonda, a Ford Zephyr and a Humber Super Snipe. One recalls that a Humber Super Snipe appears in Pinter's *Homecoming*. For older readers all these cars come with codable, semantic associations. The most memorable automotive moment is when David takes a ride in a red Citroen

DS *décapotable* with 'hydropneumatic suspension' which makes 'the whole car rise like a hovercraft.' Here is the ecstatic celebration of the ride:

'The floating sensation was only part of the novelty. I had never been in an open-top car before – there was the surprise of moving off, the air stirring already around us, and once we were out in the lane the absence of anything between us and the trees and gateways and swiftly reorganizing landscape as we picked up speed, while the trees and the gateways set up their own rhythmic bluster, fast irregular patterns of whooshes and thumps; I felt full of air, almost stifled by it. It was a day with a stealthy almost summery warmth. (p. 39)'



A Citroen DS 21 *décapotable* 1968.
Yours for £131,171

David says it's 'the most beautiful car I've ever seen', although I think the rear-end is a bit half-arsed. Roland Barthes raves about it in *Mythologies* (1957), which Anglo-Saxon readers will find a prime candidate for 'Pseuds Corner'. In French there is an irritating pun that DS is *Déesse* (Goddess):

'La "Déesse" a tous les caractères (du moins le public commence-t-il par les lui prêter unanimement) d'un de ces objets descendus d'un autre univers, qui ont alimenté la néomanie du XVIIIe siècle et celle de notre science-fiction: la Déesse est d'abord un nouveau Nautilus.'

The D.S. – the 'Goddess' – has all the features (or at least the public is unanimous in attributing them to it at first sight) of one of those objects from another universe which have supplied fuel for the neomania of the eighteenth century and that of our own science-fiction: the Déesse is first and foremost a new Nautilus.'

There's more of the same. The dashboard is metal and chrome, different from the 'glossy walnut' of a Riley 1.5 litre (p. 168). This, incidentally, is the bulbous later Riley with the Morris Minor floorpan (1957-1965), not the svelte RME (real Riley) produced from 1953 to 1955.

The experience of driving with trees rushing past can be compared to Seamus Heaney's lovely poem about driving through a line of Scotch firs across the North Antrim bog: 'A fanned nape/ Sensitive to the millionth of a flicker.' (*Seeing Things* (1991)). The trees at Frosses, on the A26 between Ballymena and Bally-

money, were planted in 1839 by Sir Charles Lanyon (1813-1889), who copied the Founder's Tower at Magdalen College (Hollinghurst's College) when he designed Queen's University, Belfast. It's all very sad; since the first publication of Heaney's poem (1989) many of the trees have been cut down, 50 in 1999 and 26 in July 2007 for health and safety reasons.



Frosses Avenue being cut down
in July 2007



Frosses Bog circa 1900, with turf stacks



Frosses Avenue

Eventually this poem will be as famous as Hopkins's 'Binsey Poplars'. I digress. There's a very good moment in *Our Evening* when a car approaches a large country house 'in a deferentially low gear' (p. 399), and a spot-on portrait of a Ford Anglia, compared with the American 'high-finned miracles as wide as haycarts': 'Whereas the Anglia, with its anxious little grille and back-to-front back window, seemed eager to be smaller and fold itself away.' (p. 167)

Acute alertness to surroundings is a feature of all Hollinghurst's novels. He notices things, so at the Ivy Restaurant, for instance, 'the peculiar multi-coloured diamond-paned windows.' (p. 348) Will that do him out of a freebie? And me too?



The Ivy Restaurant: 'the peculiar multi-coloured diamond-paned windows'

Almost nothing to criticise, although I think when in Chapter 23 David is giving an account of the last scene of Act I of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* he should slip in some lines and phrases.

The pages near the end bring us close to our own time, with trenchant thoughts on the Brexit vote on 23 June 2016: 'Last night's vote was for action in the future, a devastation due to hang menacingly over us for years. Long enough to count the time, make plans, as under the death sentence of a disease.' (p. 455) It's a 'cognitive shock' that the MP associated with the victory is the school bully Giles Hadlow. Gerard Manley Hopkins's words from *The Wreck of the Deutschland* float into David's consciousness: 'hope had mourning on, hope was twelve hours gone.' Hollinghurst/David is prone to political archness, as his observation that when a politician promises to 'deliver' 'over the following years' it 'insidiously' comes 'to mean its opposite, to mean "take away."' (p. 422)

The very last pages are written by David's husband Richard Roughsedge, who has edited the memoir. So this explains how we have come by the text we have been reading. David was mugged by a racist, and

loses his life. At his funeral a recording of him reading from *The Tempest* is played: 'Our revels now are ended.' Richard realises that memoirs are often creative rather than recuperative, writing: 'David once said that his memoir "involved continuous traffic between "confident memory" and "honourable invention". Any bit of dialogue from fifty years back must be an invention, except for a few salient phrases (which time and repetition may have chiselled into great salience still).' (p. 485). He is referring to what David said that "no one recalls more than a few words anyone actually said fifty years ago. You just have to make them up.'" (p. 447) We have seen the shiftiness of narrative in other novels – in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) and *Sweet Tooth* (2012) for instance. At the very end Richard can't decide whether 'the possessive pronoun of the title [*Our Evenings*] is a solace or an ambush.'

BERNARD RICHARDS

The editors invite and welcome contributions from all our readers. The content of Oxford Magazine relies largely on what arrives spontaneously on the editors' desk and is usually published as received.

Our contact address is: tim.horder@dpag.ox.ac.uk

Ben Bollig has stepped down as co-editor during his term as Assessor.

Celebrating Daily Info

Sir – I wish to thank Miranda Rose for her wonderful celebration of 60 years of *Daily Info*, and her father for creating it (*Oxford Magazine*, No 468, 0th Week, MT 2024). It brought a tear to my eye.

So many good things have come from perusing the sheet in College lodges and G&D's over the decades, and I still refer newcomers to Oxford, or those asking how to find accommodation, or meet people, or find a hobby or talks to the website. What a splendid resource it has been and continues to be! I am so happy to hear that it will be available in its entirety to researchers at the Oxford History Centre, because it will vividly give a flavour of what was going on in Oxford at any particular time.

Your sincerely

LUCY MATHESON

Librarian, Lincoln College

Colloquial speech in University disputation

Sir – Over forty years ago (I was involved in a minor way as an outside source of advice and comment), Oxford set its face against the use of college or university buildings for conferences or colloquia held by bodies not formally connected to the University.

That rule brought to an end a practice that had grown up whereby various odd groups with strange beliefs had hired rooms and beds in a college in summer and held a meeting – sometimes over three or four days. They then published their views saying, quite correctly, that a conference at Oxford had endorsed the view taken.

That endorsement was not a surprise. Belief in the view shared was often a condition precedent for those attending. Such colloquia were trading on the University's good name for academic excellence and rigour. It had to be stopped. And it was.

Oxford then had good reasons to be sceptical about colloquia as a form of discourse. The University felt that colloquia should be conversations, larger versions of tutorials where the distinguishing obvious feature is a 'question and answer' way of exploring a given defined subject. We might call that 'the Socratic method'. The colloquium is *au fond*, or ought to be, a very 'University Thing'. It should not ever in a university become the mere celebration of a widely held opinion.

TO THE EDITOR

A colloquium is sadly rarely an academic event these days. It is more usually now a mere Public Relations convention and presentation, a way of flagging-up to a chosen audience (students, intending students, existing donors, potential donors) some supposed virtuous practice or belief. It does not involve thought. Just passive listening and applause stimulated by platitudes.

One of the major things wrong about that is that such gatherings frequently and inadvertently subvert what the established University department in the area studied believes to be true on the basis of its research, and which it promulgates through the medium of its teaching.

Modern colloquia are always celebrations of an accepted notion, even if, as is sometimes the case, that notion is old-fashioned, out-dated, ill-founded, or just plain wrong. They usually do not involve critical or independent thought. The task of the University, on the other hand, is to challenge orthodoxies and disturb commonly held erroneous ideas. Critical thought, and the means to verify it, are essential components.

Colloquia examining the wide subjects beloved of the social and public media thus become and remain subversive of the whole idea of the University. Colloquia in the University setting should only be used to mark the publication of a festschrift in honour of some retiring scholar. The audience then should comprise those whom he or she taught and those rivals who can now smile as they leave the battlefields of academe for the last time.

If we are to come together to examine a topic, the correct format (outside of the University's own teaching programme) is the Disputation where contrasting ideas can be discussed according to the academic equivalent of boxing's the Marquess of Queensbury Rules. Students and others forming the audience can – indeed must – ask questions. They will learn much from

the answers, but perhaps more from the display of vigorous disagreement expressed in a courteous manner, and according to the agreed rules of engagement. They may leave the occasion anxious to explore these matters for themselves. That is the core of University life – exciting and encouraging curiosity and the fascination of what is difficult.

What of the Vice-Chancellor's recent colloquium? I have some views on climate, but I will not comment here. I did, however, consider what the Vice-Chancellor's suggestion of a colloquium on the Middle East might look like. I believe if it were attempted properly, that is to say, conducted to academic standards, it might end in a public relations disaster. Even a riot. Or worse.

The fact is that the Middle East has been contentious for a long time – ever since 1798 when Napoleon became the first Westerner to destroy an Arab city (Cairo) in order to save it. Later the French (Homs and Damascus) and the British (Alexandria from the sea) tried flattening places to rubble to make a point.

If I have my dates right, in 1901 Chaim Weizmann told the Zionist Conference, 'I have seen the bride (Palestine). She is beautiful, but she is married to another man'. That is the nub of the problem right there. That and the rubble raisers.

What would a Middle East colloquium say, or do, about this bartered or battered bride? I venture to suggest that Oxford should not abandon its own standards to obtain temporary favour by appearing to pre-support any view of the Middle East. A University should be guided by a quest for knowledge rather than the enthusiasm with which the colloquium on climate was reportedly greeted.

Enthusiasm does not help, you see. Widespread action motivated by a shared emotion, or by a common judgement, is not to be recommended. And especially not in Oxford. In '*Zuleika Dobson – an Oxford love story* (1911 Max Beerbohm) all the young men of the University, united in their love for the beautiful Zuleika, killed themselves. The academic staff didn't notice. There may be a lesson about colloquia there.

Yours sincerely

DON CARLETON

Bristol

The next issue of Oxford Magazine will appear in fifth week

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NOTICE

Jane Griffiths, literary editor of the *Oxford Magazine*, will be pleased to read literary submissions of any description—e.g. verse, critical prose, very short stories, segments of dialogue, reviews of new dramatic productions and books, etc. Submissions should be no longer than 750 words, and where possible should be sent by email attachment to jane.griffiths@ell.ox.ac.uk together with a two-sentence biog.

Not the *Gazette*

N.B. The *Oxford Magazine* is not an official publication of the University. It is a forum for the free expression of opinion within the University.

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